

The Real Truth About Santa Claus – The Rev. Suzelle Lynch,
Unitarian Universalist Church West, Brookfield, WI 11-15-07

First Reading

Editorial Page, New York Sun, 1897 (Francis P. Church)

I am 8 years old. Some of my little friends say there is no Santa Claus. Papa says, "If you see it in The Sun, it's so." Please tell me the truth, is there a Santa Claus?

Virginia O'Hanlon

Virginia, your little friends are wrong. They have been affected by the skepticism of a skeptical age. They do not believe except they see. They think that nothing can be which is not comprehensible by their little minds. All minds, Virginia, whether they be men's or children's, are little. In this great universe of ours, man is a mere insect, an ant, in his intellect as compared with the boundless world about him, as measured by the intelligence capable of grasping the whole of truth and knowledge.

Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus.

He exists as certainly as love and generosity and devotion exist, and you know that they abound and give to your life its highest beauty and joy. Alas! how dreary would be the world if there were no Santa Claus! It would be as dreary as if there were no Virginias. There would be no childlike faith then, no poetry, no romance to make tolerable this existence. We should have no enjoyment, except in sense and sight. The external light with which childhood fills the world would be extinguished.

Not believe in Santa Claus! You might as well not believe in fairies. You might get your papa to hire men to watch in all the chimneys on Christmas eve to catch Santa Claus, but even if you did not see Santa Claus coming down, what would that prove? Nobody sees Santa Claus, but that is no sign that there is no Santa Claus. The most real things in the world are those that neither children nor men can see. Did you ever see fairies dancing on the lawn? Of course not, but that's no proof that they are not there. Nobody can conceive or imagine all the wonders there are unseen and unseeable in the world.

You tear apart the baby's rattle and see what makes the noise inside, but there is a veil covering the unseen world which not the strongest man, nor even the united strength of all the strongest men that ever lived could tear apart. Only faith, poetry, love, romance, can push aside that curtain and view and picture the supernal beauty and glory beyond. Is it all real? Ah, Virginia, in all this world there is nothing else real and abiding.

No Santa Claus? Thank God he lives and lives forever. A thousand years from now, Virginia, nay 10 times 10,000 years from now, he will continue to make glad the heart of childhood.

Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year!!!!

Second Reading

From -- *4,000 Years of Christmas*, by Earl W. Count

"Shall we liken Christmas to the web in a loom? There are many weavers, who work into the pattern the experience of their lives. When one generation goes, another comes to take up the weft where it has been dropped. The pattern changes as the mind changes, yet never begins quite anew. At first, we are not sure that we discern the pattern, but at last we see that, unknown to the weavers themselves, something has taken shape before our eyes, and that they have made something very beautiful, something which compels our understanding."

SERMON -- The Real Truth About Santa Claus – The Rev. Suzelle Lynch, Unitarian Universalist Church West, Brookfield, WI 11-15-07

Santa Claus. The very name makes us smile, makes us think of magic and fun and joy and giving. It reminds us of the innocence of little children.

But at some point in our lives, all of us lose our innocence, don't we. And we learn the real truth about Santa Claus.

I learned the truth about Santa Claus the year I was eight years old -- not at Christmas time, but ironically, at Easter. My loss of innocence came thanks to my friend Janet who lived down the street, and thanks, indirectly, to sex.

What does sex have to do with Santa Claus?

Well, it was spring, and all around us the flowers were budding and the birds were nesting, and I had just read a very interesting book, given to me by my parents, called "How Life Begins." It was a great book that did exactly what its title promised: it described in detail the various reproductive processes of plants and animals, culminating in a clean and clinical discussion of where human babies came from. I had learned "the facts of life," and found them fascinating, and I was eager to share them with my friend.

So I did. I showed her my book, and told her everything I had learned. Well, Janet was grossed out. She didn't believe me. Her parents had told her that the stork had brought her to the hospital and that they then brought her home. "You mean our parents did that? Eww!" she cried in disgust and disbelief, looking at the diagrams in my book. She ran home to ask her mother if it were really true, and, upon learning that indeed, it was, came back and announced to me, as a sort of payback in disillusionment, "Well, Miss Smartypants, I guess you didn't know that the Easter Bunny isn't real, did you?"

The Easter Bunny not real? I was shocked. But Janet insisted, so it was my turn to go and ask my mother for the truth.... And when she told me that Janet was correct, I said, "Well, I guess that means there's no Santa Claus then, either, is there?"

No Santa Claus. What would our world be without Santa Claus? In the New York Sun editorial published a century ago, Francis P. Church told another little girl that Santa Claus "exists as certainly as love and generosity and devotion exist," asserting that "The most real things in the world are those that neither children nor men can see." I would not have been able to understand those words as a child, but they certainly have the ring of truth for me now. Church was trying to tell the truth about Santa Claus to little Virginia O'Hanlon and the whole world in a way that while it might be an end to innocence, it wouldn't be an end to the magic.

How can we hold on to the magic of Santa Claus without a false return to innocence? Some of us experience Santa's power vicariously through our own children or grandchildren or nieces and nephews, or those of our friends. But they're bound to grow up someday. And I don't know about you, but the crass commercialism of the season doesn't bring me a lot of spiritual sustenance or joy. I do feel it sometimes when I sing traditional Christmas carols, though, and I know I have felt at least a twinge of it each year at our holiday intergenerational "participatory Nativity" service, too. There's something about those old songs and that old story that really speaks to my soul.

But what about Santa Claus? What's the real truth? Who is he, really? Is he a jolly fat man with a long, white beard and a red suit who lives at the North Pole? Does he really "see us when we're sleeping, and know when we're awake?" like some kind of omniscient demi-god? Is he watching us THIS VERY MOMENT? Does he really have elves working for him? Does he truly drive a sleigh with flying reindeer that enable him to bend time and deliver gifts to all Earth's children in one evening? Or is there an older, deeper meaning behind all that folklore somewhere.... Something like the warp threads of the loom Earl Count was speaking of in our second reading – a story that forms the foundation upon which the many, many weavers have embellished with weft threads of great color and delight in the ensuing years.

Santa Claus is complicated. Many of us are at least somewhat familiar with his possible origin in the figure of Saint Nicholas – but I wonder how many of us know the history of Nicholas' transformation from a thin, ascetic Catholic Bishop of the fourth century to the 20th century jolly fat man – and what has been gained and what has been lost along the way.

It's actually arguable that Santa Claus begins with St. Nicholas, but more about that later. St. Nicholas himself, is a figure whose very existence is questioned by many, including the authorities in the Roman Catholic Church. Nevertheless, miraculous stories about him were told and retold for centuries.

Nicholas was said to be a young man from a moderately wealthy family in the region of Asia Minor which later became Turkey, whose parents died from the plague. He gave away his inheritance and became a priest, and while still very young, became a bishop known for his kindness and wisdom. He was arrested at age 28 for refusing to worship the Emperor Diocletian, and spent five years suffering in a primitive prison until Constantine came to power, and established Christianity as the state religion. By the time of his death at age 63, people throughout Asia Minor had already begun to tell stories about him, crediting him with miracles. By the year 450, churches in Asia Minor and Greece were being named for him, and by the year 800 he was recognized as a saint by the Eastern Catholic Church. December 6th, is his official name day.

Nicholas is the patron saint of sailors, bakers, marriageable young women, and little children (what those groups have in common I'm not quite sure...). Many of his legends include miracles involving these groups of people, including the following (which is one of the most popular stories about him).

It seems that in Myra, where he was a bishop, Nicholas heard of a father with three daughters who was too poor to provide dowries for them. Rather than see his daughters slowly starve to death, the father decided there was only one thing he could do – sell his oldest daughter into slavery, and use the money to feed the other two.

Nicholas could not bear to let this happen, so in the dark of night, he filled a bag with gold, hurried through the streets to the man's house, and tossed the bag through an open window. The daughter was saved by Nicholas' gift, and the father was able to arrange a good marriage for her.

Naturally, this same scenario unfolded twice more, with the man's other two daughters. In some versions of the tale, Nicholas tossed the gold through a chimney or smoke hole in the house, where it fell into the daughters' stockings that were hung there to dry – thus providing the roots for several other holiday customs.

Due to this story and other legends involving sailors saved at sea by Nicholas, and children restored to their parents by him, people began to celebrate on St. Nicholas' name day not long after his

death. In the 11th century, a basilica housing his remains was built in Bari, Italy, a port city, and ships from all over the world visited there, and carried word of Nicholas and his good deeds to France, Germany, Holland, England, Sweden, and many other countries.

The tradition of giving gifts in the wintertime did not begin with St. Nicholas, of course. It is pre-dated by centuries by the Roman feast of Saturnalia, by Winter Solstice celebrations, and others. There were other gift-bringers in Christian tradition, too, such as the Three Wise Men, whom Spanish children believed would bring them gifts on January 5th, the eve of Epiphany. Sweden was one of the few countries whose gift-bringer, the Jultomten – a kind of Christmas elf – came on Christmas Eve. But many people in northern Europe – especially Holland, Germany and France -- adopted St. Nicholas as their gift-bringer as they became familiar with the legends about him – particularly the story of the three daughters. And as his popularity grew, so did the stories about him, and so did the number of people who worshipped him.

Thus, by the end of the 1400s, St. Nicholas was one of the most beloved religious figures in many European countries, third in line behind Jesus and Mary. Historians estimate that more than 2000 chapels, hospitals, and monasteries were named for him.

But then, a century later, along came German priest Martin Luther, who led a revolt to reform the practices of the Roman Catholic Church, which eventually led to the establishment of a whole new religious movement: Protestantism. Luther disagreed with the veneration of the saints, which he said was not based in Biblical teaching, but largely in superstition. Luther denounced St. Nicholas' Day as a celebration in which childishness and falsehood ruled.

As the Protestant Reformation spread across Europe, the celebration was moved from St. Nicholas' Day to Christmas and new figures came along to replace the saint in children's imaginations, and by the beginning of the 1600s, few European children knew of St. Nicholas.

In England, the gift-giving responsibilities were handed over to Father Christmas – who was depicted as a huge man wearing a scarlet robe lined with fur and a crown of holly, ivy or mistletoe. His

lineage goes back to the Roman Saturnalia, the celebration of the dedication of the temple to the God Saturn, a deity who was said to have taught humans the arts of agriculture. The Saturnalia was a time of wild drinking and feasting – for Saturn was dedicated to welcoming Spring and the germinating impulse of nature – (another connection, by the way, between sex and Santa Claus!). Roman soldiers had brought the celebration of the Saturnalia with them to England in the first century, and many of its traditions later became part of the English Christmas celebration (and the American one).

With St. Nicholas out of vogue, some German people chose to tell children that it was the Christ child – the Christkindl – who brought their gifts on Christmas eve (for others, it was “the Christmas Man”). Only in Holland, among the Protestant countries, did people continue to celebrate St. Nicholas after the Reformation.

According to Dutch tradition, St. Nicholas comes to Holland from Spain on a steamship in mid-November each year. He is tall and thin and wears his red bishop’s robes and miter, and travels from house-to-house over the treetops on a white horse. He is accompanied by another mythic figure known as Black Peter – a frightening creature smeared with soot who carries St. Nicholas’ bags and threatens children with birch rods if they are not good. Sometimes Black Peter was pictured wearing the clothes of a 16th century Spanish official – representing an unhappy period in Dutch history when Holland was occupied by Spain. Some legends say that Black Peter is really the devil, whom St. Nicholas has defeated and made into his servant.

But the story I like best is that Black Peter was a Muslim from North Africa who met St. Nicholas when Nicholas was imprisoned during the persecution of Christians by Emperor Diocletian (which began in the year 303 of the Common Era). Peter helped Nicholas escape from prison, and the two friends thereafter worked together – performing miracles, helping the poor, and bringing gifts to children. *(Note: I like this story for reasons I’ll say more about elsewhere, however, because Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam, was not born until the year 570 or 571, it cannot have happened this way. Peter could have been a Zoroastrian, perhaps, but not a Muslim.)*

When the Dutch came to the New World in 1624 and established their capital at New Amsterdam – now New York City – they brought their St. Nicholas with them. After the British seized the city some forty years later, and the Dutch and British intermarried for a few generations, Saint Nicholas, also known as Sinter Klaes merged with the British Father Christmas, and he began to visit homes on Christmas Eve instead of December 6th. By the end of the Revolutionary War, his name had Americanized into “Santa Claus.”

But not everyone in America had jumped on the Santa Claus bandwagon. Communities settled by Quakers, Baptists, Presbyterians, Puritans and the Congregationalists who were the fore-mothers-and-fathers of Unitarians and Universalists often denounced Christmas celebrations as pagan and sinful, because they featured so much of the Saturnalia-style feasting and reveling and drunkenness. These groups refused to enjoy the day, preferring instead to hold dreary religious services. It wasn't until 1890 (only seven years before Francis Church's famous letter to Virginia O'Hanlon) that Christmas became a legal holiday in all the states and territories of the Union.

But over time, the popularity of Santa Claus grew, and due to the imaginations and artistry of three talented people, his image began to change into the version we'd recognize today – more closely associated with secular, commercial culture than with religious meaning.

Washington Irving, the famous author of “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” was the first of the three to shine a spotlight on Santa. His humorous book entitled “Diedrich Knickerbocker's History of New York from the Beginning of the World to the end of the Dutch Dynasty,” was published in 1809, and in it, St. Nicholas is depicted as smoking a pipe and riding over the treetops in a horse-drawn wagon. Irving left Black Peter out entirely, and few Americans since that time have reclaimed him. The book was widely read, and spread the word about St. Nicholas farther than ever before.

Clement Clark Moore was one of the people who read Irving's book. Moore, as you may recall, is the author of “A Visit From St. Nicholas,” better known today as “'Twas the Night Before Christmas.” Moore wrote the poem in 1822 for his own children, basing his image

of St. Nicholas in the poem on the fat, jolly old Dutch handyman who used to work on his family's estate. By chance, the poem was published in a New York newspaper (in Troy, NY), and circulated widely in the popular press for many years, spreading the image of a red-coated Santa Claus driving a flying sleigh pulled by eight reindeer.

Thomas Nast, a popular political cartoonist, was the third person who further developed and promote Santa's image, drawing a picture of him for Harper's Weekly every year from 1863 to 1886. He was the one who showed Santa keeping records of good and bad children, and was the first to locate Santa's workshop at the North Pole, poking fun at the British, Russian and Scandinavian explorers who all were competing to be the first to reach the pole.

By the end of the 19th century, Santa Claus was everywhere, and children everywhere delighted in him. In the 1900s his image was even used in the campaigns to restrict or prohibit child labor, and gave rise to the notion that every child deserved a joyful Christmas. Santa Claus became the symbol associated with giving to charities that would help poor children – but even more so, he became ubiquitous in the world of commerce, appearing as he does today in department stores, parades, and advertisements.

So, given all of this history, what then is the real truth about Santa Claus?

It would be possible, at this point in the sermon, for me to say that you have to go out and find your own truth now. And that's actually true. You are the only one who can decide which myths and stories will be your religious stories – the ones that speak to your own particular psyche and soul. You are one of the many weavers who works into the web of the holidays the experience of your own life, as Earl Count says. But of course, I'd be cheating if I didn't tell you what I think the truth about Santa is. So here goes.

The truth, I believe, is not always found in the parts of Santa's story that make us feel good – but may perhaps be most clear, in the notes which strike a deeper and more difficult chord. For example, despite Santa's American climb into the purely secular world of capitalism and commercialism, one of those original old Santa

Clauses – St. Nicholas – was a man of religion. His giving was based in faith – in the idea that the poor have the first claim on God’s mercy. His miracles of giving were aimed at meeting the real needs of real people – not to satisfy material lusts whipped into a frenzy by advertising dollars. This truth about Santa reminds us to give not only to each other, but also to organizations that serve persons whom we may never meet, but who need help and support at the holidays, and every day.

I also find a sounding truth in the legend of Black Peter, and I am sorry that this piece of the St. Nicholas myth is lost to so many of us. Think about it -- Peter was a Muslim aiding a Christian; he was a black man in partnership with a white man. Doesn’t this symbolize the kind of working together in service to a larger calling that we all long for more of in our own lives? Peter in this way is a reminder to me of how far we still have to go before there will be a level playing field for persons of all races and cultures and religions and national in our nation – a reminder that partnership begins when we hold out our hands.

Black Peter whispers another truth to me as well, for he also represents the archetypal Shadow. He reminds us that trying to have only brightness and joy during the holiday season is impossible, for every light makes shadows when it shines upon real people and real objects. Some sadness, some disappointment – these are simply a part of Christmas, and we aren’t out of step with the season if we experience them. The Shadow also is a reminder to not repress our heart’s longings during the holidays – indeed, appropriately acknowledging and honoring the needs of the child within each one of us is especially important and psychologically healthy during the holidays. And if you have questions about how to do this, let me know!

And then there’s Father Christmas – and Saturn, his progenitor! A great reminder they are that this holiday has its grounding in the turning of our Earth’s seasons. They tell us that the lusty side of Christmas: feasting, toasting and material desires, is not bad or sinful, but instead, serves to connect us with the ground beneath our feet. The truth of Father Christmas is that we need to respect and celebrate this generous planet which has given us birth and life – and perhaps buy gifts that are recycled, recyclable, reused, long-lasting,

and come in minimal packaging.... or using other earth-friendly modalities (re-gifting comes to mind, even!).

And finally, there's a delightful truth in the fact that the Santa Claus legend has proved itself to be a very flexible and enduring one. Santa survived not only the Protestant Reformation, the move to America, the ban by some people of faith, but also the loss of his partner and friend, Black Peter, and the addition of any number of animal and elfin companions -- and continues, alive and well to this day.

What I believe Santa's endurance says is that all of us, adults, youth and children alike have a longing in our hearts to be loved, to be cherished, to be known. We want to believe that love and generosity and devotion exist, and Santa is the symbol for all of these, the promise that they abound and will give to our lives their highest beauty and joy.

But the companion truth is that Santa cannot do this alone. He is the gift-bringer, but if we are to know that we are loved, to know that somewhere out there in the wild, wide sky there is a star with our name on it, if we are to have the gift of knowing the perfect truth of our special place in the Universe, we need to believe in and love one another. We need to remember that not only does each of us need Santa Claus, each of us is (or can be) Santa Claus for another.

The real truth about Santa Claus? It isn't something we can put our hands on or see, or name, as Francis P. Church wrote more than a century ago. It is something that only "faith, poetry, love and romance" can reach.

It is our reminder to give, as St. Nicholas gave, from our deepest values.

It is our reminder to reach out our hands in partnership, across all lines of seeming difference, like Black Peter did, and remember that miracles may happen when we do.

The truth about Santa Claus is that the blues are as appropriate a color for the holiday season as are red and green; and that every

light casts a shadow when it pours its gold over something solid and real.

And Santa's truth is also that life is good, and worth celebrating – especially when we remember to celebrate in a way that honors our connection to the good earth which gives life and substance to everything that is.

But perhaps most of all, the real truth about Santa Claus is that we – each and every one of us – is a person inherently worthy, a person with a special place in the Universe – a person who carries the gift of love and can love in return.

And so, in the days and weeks to come, those days and weeks that lead us moment by moment into the heart of the holiday season, may we all be blessed by the real truth of Santa Claus.

Amen.

Sources

1. "The Truth About Santa Claus," by James Cross Giblin, 1985
2. Numerous internet websites (search St. Nicholas, Black Peter, Saturnalia, etc. for more information).
3. "Santa and Pete," by Christopher Moore and Pamela Johnson, 1998.